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SUBJECT: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM--FIXING CIVIL MILITARY
RELATIONS IN BANGLADESH

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JAMES F. MORIARTY. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) For much of the January 2007 - January 2009 Caretaker Government tenure, the USG and local actors were concerned about the ability of Bangladesh's military to find a safe exit to allow soldiers to return to the barracks without fear of retribution. This immediate goal has been accomplished, but there are few efforts currently underway to address some of the underlying causes of civil-military conflict in Bangladesh. Because of our expertise and the good will generated by decades of continuous military-military engagement, the United States is uniquely positioned to help the politicians, bureaucrats, and military to find a new modus vivendi; we should do what we can to help fill this void.

Riding (and dismounting) the Tiger

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¶2. (C) On January 11, 2007 the President of Bangladesh declared a State of Emergency and appointed a new Caretaker Government (CTG) that eventually remained in power for two years. Many people assumed that the Bangladesh Army played a determining role in the President's decision and subsequently during the CTG period. Most observers assumed that Chief of Army Staff General Moeen had the final say on major decision and that the Army was the ultimate arbitrator. (Note: While some of these same issues also apply to the Bangladesh Navy and Air Force, the Army is by far the dominant service.) While military officers (primarily assigned to the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence or the anti-corruption task forces) did commit excesses in the anti-corruption drive and were heavily involved in politics beyond their mandate, the Army played a generally positive role over the past two years. In particular, the Army's role in registering 80 million new voters was absolutely essential to the successful transition to democracy. The Army also provided vital assistance in responding to floods and a devastating cyclone in 2007 and helping to prevent a regime-threatening crisis. Other Army initiatives, such as trying to control food prices, were well intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful.

¶3. (C) Defying many skeptics at home and abroad, Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed kept his word and the Army returned to the barracks in December 2008 after helping to create conditions for free, fair, credible and peaceful elections. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League Government understand and appreciate the Army's role, in particular Moeen's. At the same time, the Awami League is also aware of its own history and the legacy of distrust that exists

between the Army and the party, which dates back to the first post-independence government. As a result, the PM and her Advisers appear eager to improve the quality of the civil military relationship.

¶4. (C) As one member of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's inner circle recently told us bluntly, the AL wants to ensure that the Army does not intervene to cut short its tenure. More broadly, the AL also realizes it needs tacit or explicit support from the Army to make progress on Indo-Bangladesh and counter terrorism issues. Hasina and her inner circle are grappling with how to approach this issue.

Roads Taken: and Abandoned

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¶5. (C) During the CTG period, the Army and its supporters saw the creation of a National Security Council as the key to addressing their concerns. Understandably, the political parties and civil society resisted this idea because they perceived it to be an attempt to create a "super cabinet" with veto power over government decisions. They also remembered former military dictator Hussain Muhammad Ershad's attempt to establish an NSC during his tenure. Additionally, many skeptics drew parallels to Pakistan's or Turkey's National Security Councils, which they saw as simply an instrument for perpetuating Army rule. Leaders of both major parties resisted the formation of a NSC and this initiative sputtered. Recognizing the need for some type of institutional change the AL has mooted a possible National Security Advisory Council, whose composition, membership, and charter remain undefined.

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The Way Forward

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¶6. (C) Most donors have shied away from civil military issues and this topic has been notable by its absence during their policy discussions. In many ways Civil-Military relations are the proverbial "elephant in the room" in Bangladesh. The upcoming visit by Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) Director LTG (Ret) Ed Smith will provide us an opportunity to engage further with civilian and uniformed counterparts interested in shaping the emerging civil military relationship. One opportunity would be to look at Parliament's defense oversight role, for instance, by working with and strengthening the Parliamentary Committee on Defense. There is also a need to look at other elements, including a U.S.-style National Security Council system that takes into account the interests of different actors.

¶7. (C) We also see a need to simply increase the opportunities for members of the Bangladesh military to interact with civilian and elected officials, and vice versa. Culturally, the military is isolated from the rest of Bangladeshi society. Officers and enlisted personnel primarily live on military cantonments, their children attend military schools, and they receive treatment in military hospitals. Politicization of the officer corps has further isolated senior officers from the population. A positive outcome has been the development of an increasingly better educated, trained, and professional military, in many ways far superior to its civilian counterparts. This is aided by the positive macro and micro impact of UN Peacekeeping operations (PKO) on the military; participation in PKO provides international exposure and significant economic benefits. Analogous opportunities for the civilian bureaucracy or elected officials are very limited.

¶8. (C) We have an opportunity to play a positive role in addressing this weakness both because of US experience and expertise in civil-military relations but also because of our credibility with the elected government (which credits us with ensuring elections) and with the military, through our

constant mil-mil engagement. Possible concrete interventions would include working with the Parliamentary Defense Committee to help its members exercise their oversight role. We could also provide opportunities for military, civilian, and elected officials to interact on a more frequent basis, including through joint international visitor programs. We could additionally target influential senior civilian leaders (including from the moribund Defense Ministry) and politicians and educate them about national security issues through selected think tanks and other non-governmental organizations. Finally, we could help the Executive Branch develop other structures and institutions for improving the civil military dialogue. The March 2009 PASOC Conference on "Diplomacy, Development, and Defense" will be provide us an early opportunity to promote this level of interaction.

Not Just at the Senior-Most Levels

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¶9. (C) Historically, military interventions in Bangladesh have been prompted by mid-level officers. Though now back in the barracks, many mid-level officers involved in supporting the CTG directly through the anti-corruption drive and voter registration effort are dissatisfied, since many of the targets of investigation were ultimately set free. As we move ahead, we should particularly target programs to influence the attitudes of these mid-level officers, as their current and future decisions will be key to whether democracy succeeds in Bangladesh. In addition to new targeted programs, they should also continue to have opportunities through IMET and other engagement programs. For example, we should continue to send a many of these promising officers as possible to training such as the U.S. Army's Captain Career Course.

Comment

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¶10. (C) As Bangladesh enters a new political era, the military, civilian and elected officials, and civil society each have their role to play to ensure government provides for the needs of its people. A key USG goal is to maintain civilian control and avoid politicization of the military while professionalizing the civil service and strengthening

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other institutions. We seek to break the cycle of military intervention while ensuring Bangladesh's security and ensuring the USG has a strong partner on issues such as regional cooperation to fight terrorism. We look forward to discussing these issues during LTG (ret) Ed Smith's upcoming visit. This will also form a key component of our plan for engaging with the new government. We would welcome feedback from others in the USG with experience working on these issues.

MORIARTY